

# ORATION

BY

WILLIAM H. SEWARD,

AT PLYMOUTH,

DECEMBER 21, 1855.

---

ALBANY:

WEED, PARSONS AND COMPANY.

1856.

Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2017 with funding from

This project is made possible by a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services as administered by the Pennsylvania Department of Education through the Office of Commonwealth Libraries

# ORATION.

---

SOCIETY and Government are mutually related and inseparable. The material, intellectual, moral and spiritual conditions of every people, determine, through either a direct exercise of their will or their passive consent, the nature and form of their government. Reasoning from the attributes of the Creator and from the constitution of man, we justly conclude that a high stage of social happiness is attainable, and that beneficent government is therefore ultimately possible. Any different theory makes the hopes which sustain virtue delusive, and the Deity, who inspires them, a demon, equally to be feared and hated. Experience, however, teaches us that the advances of mankind towards such happiness and government are very slow. Poetry, indeed, often presents to us pleasing scenes of national felicity; but these are purely imaginary, while history is an almost unrelieved narrative of political crimes and public dangers and calamities.

We discover, by induction, moral laws as inflexible as the material laws of the universe. We know, therefore, that the tardiness of political progress results from a failure thus far to discover or apply those moral laws. The failure, at first view, excites surprise. Social melioration is apparently an object of general and intense desire. Certainly, the arts which subserve material safety, subsistence and comfort,

have been eminently improved. We construct useful engines recently conceived ; we search the whole surface of the round earth with comparative ease ; we know the appointed courses and seasons of worlds which we can scarcely see. It is doubtful whether the arts of architecture, painting, sculpture and poetry, are susceptible of higher perfection. Why, then, does political science remain obscure, and the art of government uncertain and perplexed ?

It happens, in some degree, because material wants have hitherto exacted excessive care ; in some degree, because the advantages which result from political improvements are indirect and diffusive ; but chiefly because the science is in its nature recondite, and the art intrinsically difficult.

Metaphysics is a science confessedly abstruse, and generally regarded as irksome and fruitless. Lord Bacon so pronounces, and he explains :—"For the wit and mind of man, if it work upon matter, which is the contemplation of the creatures of God, worketh according to the stuff, and is limited thereby ; but if it work upon itself, as the spider worketh his web, then it is endless, and brings forward, indeed, cobwebs of learning, admirable for the fineness of thread and work, but of no substance or profit." How could the study of groups be either easier or more satisfactory than that of individual man ? The same philosopher confesses that "government is a part of knowledge, secret and retired."

Consider only one State. Its magnitude is immense, its outlines are indistinct, it is without symmetry of parts ; its principles and dispositions are a confused aggregate of the imperfectly understood principles and dispositions of many thousands or even many millions of men. The causes which have chiefly given form and direction to these principles and dispositions are either unknown or forgotten ; those which are now modifying them are too subtle for our examination. The future of States involves further conditions, which lie outside of the range of human foresight, and

therefore are called accidents. Human life is short, while the process of induction in political science reaches through generations, and even ages. Philosophers seldom enjoy facilities for that process. Hence, they "make imaginary laws for imaginary commonwealths, and their discourses are as the stars, which give little light, because they are so high." Statesmen, on the contrary, "write according to the States where they live, what is received law, and not what ought to be law."

A constitutional alteration is often necessary to secure a desirable social improvement; but such an alteration cannot be made without a previous change of public opinion in the State, and even of opinion in surrounding States; for nations are social persons, and members of an universal commonwealth. Habit resists such changes. Timidity, though looking forward, is short sighted; and with far sighted veneration, which always looks backward, opposes such changes. Laws, however erroneous, or however arbitrarily established, acquire a supposed sanctity from the ceremony of their enactment, and derive great strength from protracted acquiescence. In a despotic State, no subject can move changes. In a free one, each member may oppose, and opponents more easily combine than advocates. Ambition is the ruling passion of States. It is blind to defects and dangers, while hurrying them on in careers of aggression and aggrandizement. The personal interests and ambitions of many effective members of the State cling to its institutions, however erroneous or injurious, and protect them against innovation. Reform can only appeal to reason and conscience. Conservatism arouses prejudice, cupidity and fear, and adroitly excites and directs hatred against the person of the reformer. Retaliation too naturally follows; and so the controversy, which properly ought to be a public and dispassionate one, changes imperceptibly into a heated conflict of factions. Humanity and benevolence are developed only with increas-

ing knowledge and refinement. Hence, castes and classes long remain; and these, although all equally interested in a proposed melioration, are, by an artful direction of their mutual antipathies, made to defeat it by their implacable contentions. Material interests are immediately roused and combined in opposition, because they suffer from the least disturbance. The benefits of a social change are more distant, and therefore distrusted and undervalued. The law of progress certainly does not require changes of institutions to be made at the cost of public calamities, or even of great private inconveniences. But that law is, nevertheless, inexorable. A necessary reformation will have its way, peacefully if favored, violently if resisted. In this sense, the Founder of Christianity confessed that he had come upon the earth to bring, not peace, but a sword. Revolutions are not divinely appointed attendants of progress, nor is liberty necessarily born of social convulsion, and baptized with blood. Revolutions, on the contrary, are the natural penalties for unwise persistence in error, and servile acquiescence in injustice and oppression. Such revolutions, moreover, are of doubtful success. Most men engage readily enough in civil wars, and for a flash are hot and active; but they cool from natural unsteadiness of temper, and abandon their objects, and, destitute alike of principle, honor and true courage, betray themselves, their associates, and even their cause, however just and sacred. Happily, however, martial revolutions do not always fail. In some cases, the tempers and dispositions of the nation undergo a propitious change; it becomes generous, brave and self-denying, and freedom consequently gains substantial and enduring triumphs. It is hard, in such cases, to separate the share of fortune from that of merit, in analyzing the characters of heroes. Nor is it absolutely necessary. The martial heroism of such revolutions is wisely honored, even with exaggeration, because such honors stimulate a virtuous and



healthful emulation. Mankind seek out the noblest among the successful champions, and investing him with imaginary excellence in addition to his real merit, set him apart as an object of universal veneration to the world's end. We recognize such impersonations in Tell and Alfred, in Wallace and Washington.

These successful martial revolutions, however, only consummate changes which were long before projected and prepared by bold, thoughtful, earnest and persevering reformers. There is justly due, therefore, to these reformers at least some of the homage which redeemed nations award to their benefactors. We shall increase that tribute, if we reflect that the sagacity which detects the roots and causes from which national calamities and thraldoms spring, and proceeds calmly to remove them, and to avert the need of an ultimate sanguinary remedy, or prepare that remedy so that it shall be effectual, combines the merits of genius, of prudence and humanity, with those of patriotism. Our admiration of these reformers will rise still higher when we remember that they always are eminently good men, denied the confidence and sympathies of the country which they are endeavoring to save. They are necessarily good men, because only such can love freedom heartily.

"All others love not Freedom, but license, which never hath more scope or indulgence than under tyrants. Hence it is that tyrants are not often offended, nor stand much in doubt of bad men, as being all naturally servile; but in whom virtue and true worth most is eminent, these they fear in earnest, as by right their masters. Against these lie all their hatred and suspicion. Consequently, neither do bad men hate tyrants, but have been always readiest, with their falsified names of loyalty and obedience, to color over their base compliances."

The devotion of these real authors of all beneficent revolutions to the melioration of human society, is therefore the most perfect and impressive form of magnanimity.

I know very well that this estimate is not generally allowed; nor is the injustice of the case peculiar. It

occurs in all other departments of activity. We justly honor the name of Watt, who applied the ascertained mechanical power of steam to the service of the useful arts of social life—and the memory of Fulton, who converted the steam engine into a marine power, and sent it abroad on all lakes, rivers and oceans, an agent of commerce, knowledge, civilization and freedom. Yet we seldom recall the previous and indispensable studies of the Marquis of Worcester, who announced his invention of the steam engine itself in those words, as full of piety and benevolence as of joy:

“Thanks to God, next to those which are due for creation and redemption, for having vouchsafed an insight into so great a secret of nature, beneficial to all mankind, as this water commanding engine.”

We cheerfully accord renown to Morse, who produced the electric telegraph; but we are prone to forget that Franklin discovered the germ of that great invention, by boldly questioning the awe-inspiring lightnings in their native skies.

There is abundant excuse for the popular neglect of peaceful, social reformers. Either they are engaged in apparently idle and visionary speculations, or else occupied in what seems even more absurd, an obstinate contention with the prevailing political philosophy of their age. Those speculations assume the consistency of science—that contention, the dignity of knowledge—only when in some later age the principles they announced have been established. In the meantime, they pass for malcontents and fanatics. The rude taste of society generally delights in themes and characters which are sounding, marvelous, and magnificent; and prefers the march, the camp, the siege, the surprise, the sortie, the charge, the battle, with its quickly vibrating fortunes—the victory, the agonies of the night which follows it, and the pomp and revelry of the day which banishes the complaining memories of that fearful night, to the humanitarian’s placid studies, or the bewildering debates of polemic politics.



Excusable, however, as the injustice is, which I have described, it is nevertheless unwise and injurious. It discourages necessary, noble and generous efforts, and is chief among the bulwarks of superstition and despotism. The energies of men can never remain stationary. A nation that will not tolerate the activity of intellectual energy in the pursuit of political truth, must expect the study of that truth to cease. A nation that has ceased to produce original and inventive minds, restless in advancing the land marks of knowledge and freedom, from that moment has begun to recede towards ignorance and slavery. Every stage backwards renders its return more hopeless.

I am sure that this great error will not last always, and yet I do not think it is near its end. How long it shall endure, is known only to Him who, although he commands us to sow and to plant with undoubting faith, that we shall reap and gather the fruits of our culture, reserves to himself, nevertheless, not only the control, but even the knowledge of the forth-coming seasons.

It is because I am unwilling to forego a proper occasion for disavowing that error, that I am here to celebrate, over the graves of the Forefathers, on this day devoted to their memories, the virtues, the labors and the sufferings, of the Puritans of New England and Old England. My interest in the celebration is not, like your own, a derived, but only a reflected one. I am not native here, nor was I born to the manner of this high and holy observance. The dogmatical expositions of the Christian scheme pronounced by the Puritans have not altogether commanded my acceptance. I shall, therefore, refrain from even an approach to those finer parts of my great theme, justly familiar to your accustomed orators, which reach the profoundest depths of reverence and love in the bosoms of the lineal descendants of the founders of New England. A few years after the death of N  poleon, I stood before the majestic column in the Place Vendome, that

lifts his statue high above the capital of France. When I asked who scattered there a thousand wreaths of flowers, freshly gathered, that covered its base, the answer came quickly back, "All the world." So I, one only of the same vast constituency, cheerfully cast my garland upon the tomb of the Pilgrims and lend my voice to aid your noble purpose of erecting here a worthier and more deserved monument to the memory of the Pilgrims. It is, indeed, quite unnecessary to their fame; yet it is, alas, only too necessary to correct the basis of the world's judgment of heroic worth. Make its foundations broad as the domain which the adventurers of the May Flower, peacefully and without injustice, rescued from the tramp of savage tribes! Let its material be of the imperishable substance of these everlasting hills! Let its devices and descriptions be colossal, as becomes the emblems and tributes which commemorates a world's ever upheaving deliverance from civil and religious despotism! Let its shaft rise so high, that it shall cast its alternate shadows, changing with the progress of the sun in his journey, across the Atlantic and over the intervening mountains to the Pacific coast! It must even then borrow majesty from the rock which was the first foothold of the Pilgrims on these desolate shores, instead of imparting to it sublimity.

But I may not touch the domestic story of your ancestors. Only a Jewish hand could strike the cymbals with the boldness due to the theme of the march of the host of Israel, under the guidance of its changeful pillar of cloud and of fire, while pursued by the chariots and horsemen of Egypt, through the divinely divided floods of the Arabian Sea; or, without temerity almost sacrilegious, lift from the waving boughs the harps which the daughters of Jerusalem hung upon the willows, while by the side of the rivers of Assyria they sat down, and wept the piteous captivity of their nation, beloved, but temporarily forsaken of God.

It is a sure way of promoting knowledge and virtue, as well as of rising to greatness and goodness, to study with due care and reverence the operation of sublime principles of conduct in advancing the progress of mankind. I desire so to contemplate the working of the leading principle of the Puritans.

I confess that the Puritans neither disclosed nor discovered any new truths of morals or of government. None such have been discovered, at least since the Divine Teacher set forth the whole system of private and public ethics among the olive groves, on that one which was his favorite among the mountains that look down upon Jerusalem.

Nor was it their mission to institute a new progress of mankind. Although the eastern nations, the first to enjoy the light of civilization, had long before the age of the Puritans, sunk into that deep sleep from which there is as yet no awaking, yet Europe was even then full of energy, enterprise and hope. The better elements of the Oriental and Mediterranean civilizations had survived and, coöperating with the pure influences of Christianity, were enlightening and refining the southern and western nations. The Western church, which until recently was unpartitioned, had long defended the faith against the Saracens, and protected feeble States against the aggressions of ambitious princes. It still held the nations in the bonds of a common fraternity. Nor had it forgotten to proselyte, after the primitive manner, by inculcating morality and charity. It had, by its potent command, addressed to the conscience of Christendom, abolished throughout Europe that system of personal servitude in which a large, perhaps the largest, portion of every community had been held, under every form of government. It bore its testimony steadily against that system everywhere declaring that "God and Nature equally cry out against human slavery; that serfs and slaves are a part of the human family which Christ died to redeem; and that equality is an

essential incident of that brotherhood which he enjoins as a test by which his disciples shall be known."

The foundations of that comprehensive international code, which is now everywhere accepted, were broadly laid. It was then clearly taught that "there are in nature certain fountains of justice, from which all pure civil laws flow, varying only in this—that as waters take tinctures and tastes from the soils through which they run, so do civil laws differ according to the regions and governments where they are planted." Luther had already summoned Europe to a new and more vigorous morality, and Calvin's sharp voice was ringing through the continent, calling the faithful away from all ostentatious ceremonies of worship, to that pure and spiritual one which God prefers "before all temples." The feudal policy, although founded in very imperfect conceptions of civil society, had saved, through the recent decline, many personal and political rights and privileges which otherwise would have been swept away, as they were in Asia, by the desolating hand of absolute power. Chivalry, a wild vine, engrafted upon Christianity, was bearing abundant fruits of courage, constancy, gallantry, munificence, honor and clemency. The machinery of mercenary armies was not yet perfected, and the security of government was still held to depend, not on laws and force, but on the approval and sympathies of the people. Commerce had discovered that the oceans were designed, not to separate, but to unite nations, and was extending its field over all habitable climes, and taking on the dignity of its new functions as an auxiliary of empire. Manufactures had been incorporated as a distinct wheel in the enginery of national wealth; and the productive classes had already attained a position among the ruling elements of States. A wise policy of liberal naturalization was breaking up local septs and clans, and distributing the seeds of material and social improvement throughout both hemispheres. Indolence, expense and faction, had prepared



that decline of aristocratic orders which still continues. Just notions of the free tenure of lands, and even that great idea of the universal freedom of labor, which is now agitating the world, prevailed quite widely. Italy,

“The dark’ned ages’ last remaining light,”

had never failed to present examples of republican institutions. The monarchical constitutions of that period contained sharply-defined limitations, and they were vigorously guarded and defended. It was a general theory, that the subject could not be taxed without consent of the legislature, and that princes could only govern in conformity to laws. England especially had a parliament, the type of modern legislatures, trial by jury, magna charta and the common law, constituting one four fold and majestic arch for the support of civil liberty. She had, moreover, emancipated herself from the supremacy of the See of Rome, and the popular mind was intently engaged equally in the pursuit of theological truth, and in the application of the organic laws to the maintenance and defence of public and private rights.

It was the age of Spenser, Shakspeare, Bacon and Milton. Poetry had risen from lyric beauty to epic dignity; history, from fabulous chronicle to philosophical argument; and learning, from words and forms, to things and laws. Reasoning from these circumstances, it seemed that the onward progress of society was assured, and that civil and religious liberty were about to be established on broad and enduring foundations.

Nevertheless, a reaction had already begun, whose force is even yet unspent. The See of Rome took alarm from the movement of the reformation, and combined with kings against nations. Henry VIII. arrogated to himself the very same spiritual supremacy, which, with the aid of the people and in the name of Christian liberty, he had wrested from



the Pope ; and with singular caprice employed it in compelling conformity to the obnoxious faith and worship of Rome, conducted by ecclesiastics who derived their appointments from himself, and held them at his own pleasure. The reign of Mary inaugurated that relapse to Rome, which the caprices of Henry had rendered inevitable. Elizabeth reinstalled the reformation, but renewed the regal claim to spiritual supremacy. The people resisted all these ecclesiastical usurpations of the Tudors, and they, in retaliation, boldly attempted to subvert the constitutional authority of parliament. Elizabeth, under the advice of sagacious statesmen, and supported by temporizing churchmen, resorted to the favorite expedient of politicians — compromise. Compromise is a feasible and often a necessary mode of adjusting conflicting material interests, but can never justly or wisely be extended to the subversion of the natural rights or the moral duties of subjects or citizens. Even where a compromise is proper in itself, it derives all its strength from the fair and full consent of all the parties whom it binds. Elizabeth caused the Roman Catholic creed, discipline and ritual to be revised and altogether recast, under the direction of leaders of some of the conflicting sects ; and thus a new system was produced, which, as was claimed, stood midway between the uncompromising Church of Rome and equally uncompromising latitudinarian Protestantism. The new system was established by law, and a hierarchy was appointed by the crown, to whose care it was committed. Absolute and even active conformity was commanded to be enforced by pains and penalties in special and unconstitutional tribunals, acting without appeal, and in derogation of the common law. The new system, whatever might be its religious and ecclesiastical harmony with the Divine precepts, was, in its civil aspects, a mere political institution. It was offensive and odious to a zealous people, who, though divided into opposing sects, agreed in regarding the political authority

assumed by the State as a sacrilegious usurpation. The friends of civil liberty also condemned it, as a turning of the batteries that had been won from the Roman See, in the name of liberty, against the very fortress of liberty itself. Nevertheless, a portion of the clergy, who had now become dependent on the State, members of the privileged classes, always disinclined to political agitation, placemen and waiters for places, the timid, the venal and the frivolous, early gave in their adhesion, and the compromise daily gained wider acquiescence, through the appliances of political seduction, proscription and persecution. The Church of England was built on that compromise. Incorporated into the constitution with such auxiliary political powers, it must necessarily augment the influence of the throne, and be subversive equally of the civil and religious liberties of the people.

A conservative power, a new conservative power, was necessary to prevent that fatal consummation. That power appeared in the form of a body of obscure religious sectaries, men of monastical devoutness, yet retaining the habits of domestic and social life ; simple, but not unlearned ; unambitious ; neither rich enough to forget their God, nor yet poor enough to debase their souls ; content with mechanical and agricultural occupations in villages and rural districts, yet conscious of the liberty with which Christ had made them free, and therefore bold enough to confront ecclesiastical and even royal authority in the capital. Serious as became their religious profession, they grew under persecution to be grave, formal and austere. Chosen emissaries of God, as they believed, they willingly became outcasts among men. Divinely constituted depositaries of pure and abounding truth, as they thought, they announced, as their own rule of conduct, that no article of faith, no exercise of ecclesiastical authority, no rule of discipline, and not even a shred of ceremonial or sacrament, should be accepted, unless sanctioned by direct warrant from the Scriptures as inter-

preted by themselves, in the free exercise of their own consciences, illuminated by the Holy Spirit. God, although a benevolent Father, was yet, as they believed, jealous towards disobedience of His revealed will, and would punish conscious neglect of its commandments. These were the Puritans. They came into the world to save it from despotism ; and the world comprehended them not. They refused to acquiesce in the compromise, because it involved a surrender of natural rights, and a violation of principles of duty toward God. Nevertheless, they were true Christians, and therefore they declined to set up their own convictions as a standard for others who subscribed to the Christian faith, and freely allowed to all their fellow subjects the same broad religious liberty which they claimed for themselves. They persisted in non-conformity. The more hardly pressed the more firmly they persisted. The more firm their persistence, the more severe and unrelenting was the persecution they endured. More than an hundred years virtually outlawed as citizens and subjects, and outcasts from the established church, the Puritans bore unflinchingly their unwavering testimony against the compromise, before magistrates and councils, in the pillory, under stripes, in marches, in camps, in prison, in flight, in exile, among licentious soldiery and dissolute companions in neighboring lands ; on the broad and then unexplored ocean, when the mariners lost their reckoning, and the ships' supplies became scanty and her seams opened to the waves ; on unknown coasts, homeless, houseless, famishing and dying ; in the leafless forest, surrounded by ice and snow, fearful of savage beasts and confronting savage men. The compromise policy failed. Civil and religious liberty was not overborne ; it rose erect ; it triumphed ; it is still gaining new and wider and more enduring triumphs ; and tyrants have read anew the lesson, so often wasted upon them before, that where mankind stand upon their convictions of moral right and duty, in disobedience

to civil authority, there is no middle course of dealing with them, between the persecution that exterminates, and the toleration that satisfies. The Puritans were not exterminated, they were not satisfied.

The Puritans thus persisted and prevailed because they had adopted one true, singular and sublime principle of civil conduct, namely: that the subject in every State has a natural right to religious liberty of conscience. They know too well the weakness of human guaranties of civil liberty, and the frailty of civil barriers against tyranny. They therefore did not affect to derive the right of toleration from the common law, or the statutes of the realm, or magna charta, or even from that imaginary contract between the sovereign and the subject, which some publicists had about that time invented as a basis for civil rights. They resorted directly to a law broader, older and more stable than all these—a law universal in its application and in its obligation, established by the Creator and Judge of all men, and therefore paramount to all human constitutions. Algernon, Sidney, Locke and Bacon, and even Hooker, chosen and ablest champion of the Church of England, demonstrated the existence of this law, deriving the evidences of it, and of its universal nature and application, from natural and revealed religion, in the high debates of the seventeenth century. Blackstone, Vattel and Montesquieu, have built upon it their respective systems of municipal law, public law and government; and our own Congress of 1776 sunk into the same enduring foundation the corner stone of this vast and towering structure of American freedom. The Puritans could therefore lay no claim to the discovery of this great principle, or to the promulgation of it. But the distinguished glory of having first reduced it from speculation to actual and effective application, as a conventional rule of political conduct, is all their own.



This great principle was not only a disturbing, but it was also an offensive and annoying one. It was an appeal from the highest sovereign power in the State to a sovereign power still higher, and therefore was thought seditious. It of course encountered then the same ingenious sophistry which, although often overthrown, has not even yet been silenced. It was argued, that if individual conscience may rightly refuse to acquiesce in the results of the general conviction collected by the State and established as law, it may also rightfully resist the law by force, which would produce disorder and lead to anarchy. It was argued, also, that insomuch as civil government is of divine appointment, it must be competent to act as an arbiter between conflicting consciences, and that implicit obedience to its decrees, as such arbiter, is therefore a religious duty. As might well have been foreseen, there arose on the side of the Puritans, contestants worthy of the majestic principle they defended, contestants whose voices, then silenced by persecution or drowned by public clamor, have reached this more congenial age, and are now giving form and condensation to the whole science of political ethics. Not again recalling the names of Locke and Sidney, there was Edwards, profoundest metaphysician of all ages, and Milton, always discontented and distrusted among men, but familiar with angels, and learned in the counsels of Heaven. It was their sufficient reply, that unenlightened and unsanctified consciences will never disturb despotism with their remonstrances, and that consciences illuminated and purified cannot be perverted to error; that God has delegated to no human tribunal authority to interfere between Himself and the monitor which he has implanted in the bosom of every moral being, and which is responsible to its Author alone; and that the boundaries of human authority are the boundaries of eternal justice, ascertained by the teachings of that monitor which, where it is free and fully awakened, must always be the same. They answered farther and with decisive



energy, that traditions and compacts subversive of freedom were altogether void, because the masses of men living at one time in a State must always have supreme control over their own conduct, in all that concerns their duty to God and their own happiness.

Fortunately, the Puritans had keen sagacity. They would not ask liberty of conscience as a political concession; because, if granted as such, it might be revoked. Fortunately they were not purposely a political or civil body, but a purely religious one; a church in the wilderness, as they described themselves; a church without secular combinations, interests or ends; a church with no interest but duty, no end but to avoid the divine disfavor, and no head but God. Fortunately, also, the age was as yet a religious one. Skepticism, which has since so wildly overrun large portions of Europe, and scattered its poison even here, had not then entered the world; and the plenary nature and authority of the Holy Scriptures, to which the Puritans appealed, was universally acknowledged. It was especially felicitous that the lives of the Puritans vindicated their sincerity, magnanimity and piety. Equally in domestic and social life, and in the great transactions of the State in which they became concerned, their conduct was without fear and without reproach. With all these advantages, the Puritans, as naturally as wisely, referred themselves to the Divine Revelations for the principle which they promulgated. With effective simplicity, they confined themselves to the main point in debate. They neither pretended to define nor to make summaries of all the natural rights of man which tyranny might invade, nor to trace out the ultimate secular consequences of the great principle on which they insisted. They rested the defence of the one natural right which was distinctly invaded, on no grounds of expediency or of public utility, but on the grounds alone that God had given it, and that man could not either invade or surrender it, without sin against the Divine majesty. It was the peculiarity of the right thus invaded and defended, that

lent to the Puritans their crowning advantage. Religion is the profoundest and most universal affection of our nature. Apparently the cause of innumerable differences and endless controversies, it is, nevertheless, the one common and principal element which controls the actions of all men. It sustained the Puritans. It gradually won for them the respect and sympathies of men and of nations. The right assailed brought equally conscience and the love of liberty, the two most elastic and enduring springs of activity, into resistance. Its invasion was sacrilegious, because it assumed to add to the Divine commandments, and to take away from disobedience to them the curses that are written against it in the Book of Life. Primitive apostolical eloquence, which reminds us of the inspired apology of Paul before Agrippa, revived in its defence. The Puritans spake from their prisons after this manner :

“Upon a careful examination of the Holy Scriptures, we find the English hierarchy to be different from Christ’s institution, and to be derived from Antichrist, being the same the Pope left in this land, to which we dare not subject ourselves. We farther find that God has commanded all that believe the gospel to walk in that holy path and order which he has appointed in his church. Wherefore, in the reverend fear of his name, we have joined ourselves together, and subjected our souls and bodies to those laws and ordinances, and have chosen to ourselves such a ministry of pastors, teachers, elders and deacons, as Christ has given to his church on earth to the world’s end, hoping for the promised assistance of his grace in our attendance upon him notwithstanding any prohibition of men, or what by men can be done unto us. We are ready to prove our church order to be warranted by the word of God, allowable by her Majesty’s laws, and no ways prejudicial to the sovereign power, and to disprove the public hierarchy, worship and government, by such evidence as our adversaries shall not be able to withstand, protesting, if we fail herein, not only willingly to sustain such deserved punishment as shall be inflicted upon us, but to become conformable for the future, if we overthrow not our adversaries. \* \* \* We therefore, in the name of God and of our sovereign the Queen, pray that we may have the benefit of the laws and of the public charters of the land, namely, that we may be received to bail, till we be by order of law convicted of some crime deserving of bonds. We plight our faith unto God, and our allegiance to her Majesty, that we will not commit anything unworthy of the Gospel of Christ, or to the disturbance of the common peace and good order of the land, and that we will be forthcoming at such reasonable warning as your

lordship shall command. Oh, let us not perish before trial and judgment, especially imploring and crying out to you for the same. However, we take the Lord of heaven and earth, and his angels, together with your own consciences and all persons in all ages, to whom this our supplication may come, to witness that we have here truly advertised your honors of our case and maze, and have in all humility offered to come to Christian trial."

How sublimely, and yet with touching effect, does this opening of their cause by the Puritans illustrate the Divine instruction that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom!

Let us consider now the scope and full import of the Puritan principle. That scope is not narrowed by any failure of the Puritans themselves to comprehend it, or even by any neglect on their part to cover it fully in their own political conduct. Christianity is the same, however narrowed or perverted by erroneous creeds or practices among the faithful. Nor is the real merit of the Puritans diminished, because they did not fully comprehend all possible applications of the principle they maintained. Human progress is only the following of an endless chain, suspended from the throne of God. The links of that chain are infinite in number. The human hand can grasp only one of them at once.

The Puritan principle of the inviolability of the right of conscience, necessarily covers the inviolability of all the acknowledged natural rights of man, as well those which concern his duty to himself and his duty to others, as those which arise out of his direct duties towards God. Certainly the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, the beneficent Father and Preserver of all life, the universal Lawgiver and Judge of all moral beings, is not in any human sense a jealous and exacting God, incensed by the withholding of homage due to himself, and yet regardless of the neglect of other human duties which he has prescribed. Assuredly, when he commands us not only to walk humbly before Himself, but also to perfect our own nature, and to do justice, and love mercy towards other men, he has given us the same absolute right to the free exercise of our faculties, in performing these latter duties, that he has given us for the performance of the

first. Nor is there any homage to God so acceptable as the upright heart and pure. He that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God, whom he hath not seen?

The Puritan principle further involves the political equality of all men. Absolute rights arise out of the moral constitution of man. There is only one moral constitution of all men. The absolute rights of all men are therefore the same. Political equality is nothing else than the full enjoyment, by every member of the State, of the absolute rights which belong equally to all men. Any abridgement of that equality, on whatever consideration, except by discriminating justice in the punishment of crimes is therefore forbidden to human government by the Divine authority. The Puritans so understood their own great principle, in its bearing upon the right of conscience.

“Liberty of conscience (said one of their earliest organs) is the natural right of every man. \* \* \* He that will look back on past times, and examine into the true causes of the subversion and devastation of states and countries, will find it owing to the tyranny of princes and the persecution of priests. The ministers of the Established Church say, ‘if we tolerate one sect, we must tolerate all.’ This is true. They have as good a right to their consciences as to their clothes or estates. No opinions or sentiments of religion are cognizable by the magistrates, any further than they are inconsistent with the peace of civil government.”

But this latitude of the principle of tolerance has been always vigorously and efficiently opposed by prejudice, pride and bigotry, in every church, in every sect, in every State and under every form of government. Each sect has claimed liberty of conscience for itself as a natural right, but with gross inconsistency, which invalidated its own argument, has denied that liberty to other sects—as if the Supreme Ruler had made men to agree, instead of differing, upon non-essential as well as upon essential articles of religious faith. The principle has nevertheless continually gained, and is still gaining, fresh triumphs. After a long contest in England, toleration was granted to all but Roman Catholics and Jews. One hundred and fifty years after the



organization of the Puritans, the principle entered into all the American constitutions. Fifty years later, it emancipated the Roman Catholics throughout Great Britain. Only a year ago, it removed the disfranchisement of the Jews in the British dominions. It has thus irrevocably become a part of the constitution of that great empire.

The Puritan principle draws closely after it the consequence of an absolute separation of church and State, for the reason that the toleration of conscience can in no other way be practically and completely established. That separation has been made in the American constitutions, with abundant advantage to both the cause of religion and the cause of good government. Great Britain is advancing steadily towards the adoption of the same broad, just and beneficent policy. The separation of church and State may therefore be regarded as a contribution made by the Puritans towards perfecting the art of government.

The political equality of men has also met with obstinate resistance, and has also achieved many and auspicious triumphs. After one hundred and fifty years of controversy, it was carried into the British constitution by the judicial decision in Somerset's case that a slave could not breathe the air of England. Ten or fifteen years later, it was theoretically adopted and promulgated in the Declaration of American Independence. The suppression of the African slave trade, by conventions of the States of Christendom, transferred the same principle to the law of nations. The abolition of African slavery by all of the European nations, and, with few exceptions, also by all of the American States, is indicative of the universal adoption of the same great principle by all Christian nations, at some period not far distant.

You are now prepared, I trust, for another and still more comprehensive view of the Puritan principle, namely: that its full and perfect development is the pure system of republican government. Such was its marked tendency in the beginning. "A generous disdain of one man's will," says a truly philosophical writer, "is to republics what chastity is



to woman—a conservative principle, not to be argued upon or subjected to calculations of utility.” Puritanism was a protest against the will of one man, whether that man was Pope or King. What form of government, other than the pure republic, can there be where there is complete separation of church and State and where absolute political equality prevails? Abolish the connection of church and State and all political distinctions between the members of the State, in any of the kingdoms or empires of Europe, and what would remain, or could exist there, but a pure republic? If the argument is not yet conclusive, consider then that the Puritan principle tends to the pure republic, by virtue of its conservative protection of the individual member of the State against its corporate oppression; by virtue, also, of its elevation of individual conscience—thus bringing down the importance of the aggregate mass, and raising the personal importance and dignity of the subject or citizen; by virtue of the importance it attaches to personal rights, exalting them above material interests—and so making those rights, and not property, the primary object of the care of government; and by virtue, still further, of the openness, directness and frankness of conduct which it requires. Equal tolerance in religion, and equal enjoyment of the other absolute rights of man, are inconsistent with the secrecy and fraud which monarchy and aristocracy necessarily employ, and cannot endure private councils or cabals. The Puritan principle tends to the pure republic still more obviously, because it seeks to abridge the powers of government, and substitute consent and free acquiescence as the bonds of union between the members of the State, instead of armed or military force. This operation of the principle is happily illustrated in our own republic, which, although constituted by an ever-increasing number of distinct States, has, nevertheless been held together eighty years, and is, I trust, to be held together forever, without, for that purpose, even the shadow of a standing army—an anomaly as pleasing as it is full of profitable instruction.

Let it be confessed that the Puritans, as a body, were slow to discern these consequences and tendencies. They disclaimed them long and with unquestionable sincerity.

“Although (said they to Elizabeth) Her Majesty be incensed against us, as if we would obey no laws, we take the Lord of heaven and earth to witness that we acknowledge, from the bottom of our hearts, Her Majesty to be our lawful Queen placed over us for our good; and we give God our most humble and hearty thanks for her happy government; and both in public and private we constantly pray for her prosperity. We renounce all foreign power, and acknowledge Her Majesty’s supremacy to be lawful and just. We detest all error and heresy. Yet we desire that Her Majesty will not think us disobedient, seeing we suffer ourselves to be displaced rather than yield to some things required. Our bodies and goods, and all we have are in Her Majesty’s hands; only our souls which we reserve to our God, who is able to save and condemn us.”

Long afterwards, and after the Puritans in America had practically enjoyed a pure republican government through some generations, the colony of Massachusetts saluted Charles II. on his restoration, with this loyal address :

“To enjoy our liberty, and to walk according to the faith and order of the gospel, was the cause of us transplanting ourselves with our wives, our little ones and our substance, choosing the pure Christain worship, with a good conscience in this remote wilderness, rather than the pleasures of England with submission to the impositions of the hierarchy, to which we could not yield without an evil conscience. We are not seditious to the interests of of Cæsar.”

Nevertheless, the reluctance of the Puritans to admit the full tendencies of their principle cannot justly excite surprise. We necessarily fear, and feel our way, when we are treading on unknown ground, or in the dark. “Let no one who begins an innovation,” says Machiavelli, “expect that he shall stop it at his pleasure, or regulate it according to his intention.” The Puritans never aimed to be, and never consciously were secular or political reformers. Their field of labor, as they bounded it, lay all within the Church of Christ. They sought not an earthly republic, but only the kingdom of heaven. When sometimes the thought presented itself, that, by reason of their fidelity to their profes-

sion, a purer and better political state would arise out of the commotions through which they were passing, it seemed still to them a merely secondary object, subordinate to the one sole religious purpose for which they had combined. We all have learned how slowly the sentiment of independence, and the principle of republicanism, ripened in these colonies during the early stages of the revolutionary contest, and how these free institutions rose suddenly under the hands of a people who were even yet protesting an enduring loyalty to the throne and parliament of Great Britain. It was not so, however, with the master spirits, Adams, Otis and Jefferson. Nor was it so in the case of the Puritans with Milton.

“No man, (said he,) who knows aught, can be so stupid to deny that all men naturally were born free, being the image and resemblance of God himself, and were, by privilege above all the creatures, born to command and not to obey. The power of kings and magistrates is nothing else but what is only derivative, transferred and committed to them in trust from the people, to the common good of them all, in whom the power yet fundamentally remains and cannot be taken from them, without a violation of their natural birthright.”

How, then, has it happened that civil consequences so vast have followed the merely religious action of the Puritans? The apparent mystery is easily explained. Civil liberty is an object of universal and intense desire. The cause of the Puritans identified itself with the cause of civil liberty in England, and ultimately, though on their part unconsciously, became the leading element of that cause, both in Europe and America. Thus identified and eminent the Puritan cause effected the establishment of a republic which endured through a short but glorious period in England. Though the British nation soon relapsed, and monarchy was restored, yet the Puritan principle, nevertheless, modified the constitution, and gave to it the popular form which it now bears. A throne yet towers above that edifice, but it is no longer the throne of the Stuarts or of the Tudors, or even of the Plantagenets. It is simply ornamental. The lords, spiritual and temporal, still constitute distinct estates, and retain their ancient dignity. But their

real political power and influence have passed away, and the commons, no longer contesting inch by inch for their constitutional rights, are virtually the rulers of the British empire. France oscillates so uneasily and tremulously between the republic and military despotism, that no one who is hopeful of progress doubts where the needle will settle at last. It has become a proverb, that Europe must soon be either republican or despotic. When the compromise system of limited monarchy shall have retired, and only the two systems of republicanism and despotism are left to confront each other on that continent, in an age of still increasing intellectual and moral energies, the triumph of the former, though uncertain in the points of time and manner and field of contest, will nevertheless be assured. The Puritan principle is shaping, already, future republics on the islands and continents of the Pacific Ocean, and on the heretofore neglected coasts of Africa, while the American continent is everywhere crowned with free institutions, due to its still more direct and potential influence. From Plymouth Rock to Labrador, to Magellan, and around, by bay, gulf, and headland, to Nootka Sound, the republican system, more or less developed, and more or less firmly established, pervades this hemisphere. Such are the already ripening and ripened fruits of the vigorous plants of Puritanism, gathered equally and promiscuously from the parent stock in England, and from the exotic one so carefully transplanted on this rugged coast, and so sedulously watered, watched, cherished and reared, by the Pilgrim Fathers.

Behold how the unfolding, justly and naturally as I trust, of a theme primarily local, sectional, and even sectarian, has brought us to the solution of the great problem of the progress of mankind towards social happiness and beneficent government. That higher stage of social happiness, that purer form of republican government, to which we are tending, are but faintly shadowed forth in the disturbed transition scenes through which we are passing, and even in the most perfect institutions which have yet been framed from the confused materials of dilapidated and decaying



systems. Present defects and imperfections no more warrant conclusions against that better future which has been indicated, than the incompleteness of the development of Christian principles justifies a fear of the ultimate failure of Christianity itself.

It is a law of human progress, that no work or structure proceeding from human hands shall come forth complete and perfect. Improvement, at the cost of labor and of trial, and even suffering—endless improvement, at such cost, is the discipline of human nature.

What, then, shall be the rule of our own conduct? Shall we grasp and hold fast to existing constitutions, with all their defects and deficiencies, and save them from needed amendment, or shall we amend and complete them, and so prevent re-actions, and the need of sanguinary revolutions? Shall we compromise the principles of justice, freedom and humanity, by compliances with the councils of interested cupidity or slavish fear, or shall we stand fast always in their defence? I know no better rule of conduct than that of the Puritans. Indeed, I know none other that is sure, or even safe. Nor can even that great rule be followed successfully without adopting their own noble temper and spirit. They were faithful, patient and persevering. They forgot themselves, and their own immediate interests and ambitions, and labored and suffered, that after-coming generations, among which we belong, might be safer and freer and happier than themselves. It can never be too well understood that the generations of men, in moral and political culture, sow and plant for their successors. "Let it not be grievous to you," said Bradford, the meek but brave and constant leader, to the small and forlorn Pilgrim commonwealth, that he was landing on this rock in mid-winter—"Let it not be grievous to you that you have been made instruments to break the ice for others. The honor shall be yours, to the world's end." Such was the only worldly encouragement the truthful founder of the Plymouth colony could give to his guileless comrades. Happily, the Pilgrims needed no others.



It is a familiar law of nature, that whatever grows rapidly also declines speedily. Time and trial are necessary to secure the full vigor without which no enterprise can endure. It was only by long, perilous and painful endurance and controversy, that the Puritans acquired the discipline which, without consciousness of their own, qualified them to be the leaders of the nations.

Need I add, that there can be neither great deeds nor great endurance without faith; and that true, firm, enduring faith can only be found in generous and noble minds. The true reformer, therefore, must calculate on frequent and ever-recurring treacheries and desertions by allies, such as Milton graphically describes :

“Another sort there is, who, coming in the course of these affairs to have their share in great actions above the form of law or custom, at least to give their voice and approbation, begin to swerve and almost shiver at the majesty and grandeur of some noble deed; as if they were newly entered into a great sin, disputing precedents, forms and circumstances, when the commonwealth nigh perishes for want of deeds in substance done with just and faithful expedition. To these I wish better instruction and virtue equal to their calling.”

Nor will all these qualities suffice, without discretion and gentleness as well as firmness of temper. The courageous reformer will shrink from no controversy, when the field is open, the battle is set, and the lists are fair. But, on the other hand, he will neither make nor seek occasions for activity; and he will be always unimpassioned. Truth is not aggressive; but like the Christian religion, is first pure, then peaceable. Nor need the reformer fear that occasions for duty will be wanting. Error and injustice never fail to provoke contest; because, if unalarmed, they are overbearing and insolent; if alarmed, they are rash, passionate and reckless.

The question occurs, Whence shall come the faith, the energy, the patient perseverance and the moderation, which are so indispensable? I answer, that all these will be derived from just conceptions of the great objects of political action. It was so with the Puritans. Their fixed purpose to retain the right of conscience, fully comprehended by

them, extinguished selfishness and ambition, and called into activity in their places the fear of God and the love of man. Let them explain themselves :

“Knowing, therefore, how horrible a thing it is to fall into the hands of the living God, by doing that which our consciences (grounded upon the truth of God’s Word and the example and doctrine of ancient fathers) do tell us were evil done, and to the great discrediting of the truth whereof we profess to be teachers, we have thought good to yield ourselves into the hands of men ; to suffer whatsoever God hath appointed us to suffer, for the perfecting of the commandments of God and a clean conscience before the commandments of men. Not despising men, therefore, but trusting in God only, we seek to serve him with a clear conscience so long as we shall live here, assuring ourselves that the things that we shall suffer for so doing shall be a testimony to the world that great reward is laid up for us in heaven, where we doubt not but to rest forever with those that have before our days suffered for the like.”

Contrast these sentiments, so profoundly self-renouncing and reverential of God, with the blasphemous egotism of the French revolutionists of 1798, and contrast also the slowly formed and slowly maturing, but always multiplying and ripening fruits of the Puritan reformation, with the blasted and shriveled benefits of that other great modern convulsion, and you have an instructive and memorable lesson upon the elevation and purity of spirit which alone can advance human progress.

Increase of wealth and commerce and the enlargement of empire, are not truly primary objects of the American patriot. These are, indeed, worthy of his efforts. But the first object is the preservation of the spirit of freedom, which is the soul of the republic itself. Let that become languid and the republic itself must languish and decline. Let it become extinct, and the republic must disastrously fall. Let it be preserved and invigorated, and the republic will spread wider and wider, and its noble institutions will tower higher and higher. Let it fall, and so its example fail, and the nations will retrograde. Let it endure and the world will yet be free, virtuous and happy. Hitherto, nations have raised monuments to survive liberty and empire. And they have been successful. Egypt, Assyria, Greece and Italy are full of those monuments. Let our ambition be the nobler

one of establishing liberty and empire, which shall survive the most stupendous material structures which genius can devise or art erect, with all the facilities of increasing knowledge and public wealth.

Here my reflections on a subject infinitely suggestive come to an end. They will not be altogether fruitless, if I have been at all successful in illustrating the truths that continual meliorations of society and government are not only possible, but certain; that human progress is slow, because it is only the unfolding of the divine providence concerning man; that the task of directing and aiding that progress is rendered the most difficult of all our labors, by reason of our imperfect knowledge of the motives and principles of human conduct, and of countless unforeseen obstacles to be encountered; that this progress, nevertheless, must and will go on, whether favored or resisted; that it will go on, peacefully, if wisely favored, and through violence, if unwisely resisted; that neither stability, nor even safety, can be enjoyed by any State, otherwise than by rendering exact justice, which is nothing else than pure equality, to all its members; that the martial heroism, which, invoked after too long passiveness under oppression and misrule, sometimes achieves the deliverance of States, is worthy of all the honor it receives; but that the real authors of all benign revolutions are those who search out and seek to remove peacefully the roots of social and political evils, and so avert the necessity for sanguinary remedies; that the Puritans of England and America have given the highest and most beneficent illustration of that conservative heroism which the world has yet witnessed; that they have done this by the adoption of a single, true and noble principle of conduct, and by patient and persevering fidelity to it; that they thus overcame a demoralizing political and social reaction, and gave a new and powerful impulse to human progress; that tyranny is deceitful, and mankind are credulous, and that therefore political compromises are more dangerous to liberty than open usurpations; that the Puritan principle, which was so

sublime and so effective, was nothing else than the truth that men retain in every State all the natural rights which are essential to the performance of personal, social and religious duties; that the principle includes the absolute equality of all men, and therefore tends to a complete development in pure republican systems; that it has already modified the institutions of Europe, while it has brought into existence republican systems, more or less perfect throughout the American continent, and is fixing and shaping such institutions wherever civilization is found; that hindrances, delays, and reactions of political progress, are nevertheless unavoidable, but that they also have corresponding benefits; that it is our duty to labor to advance that progress, chiefly by faith, constancy and perseverance — virtues which can only be acquired by self-renunciation, and by yielding to the motives of the fear of God and the love of mankind.

Come forward then, ye Nations, States, and Races—rude, savage, oppressed and despised—enslaved, or mutually warring among yourselves, as ye are—upon whom the morning star of civilization hath either not yet dawned or hath only dimly broken amid clouds and storms, and receive the assurance that its shining shall yet be complete, and its light be poured down on all alike. Receive our pledges that we will wait and watch and strive for the fullness of that light, by the exercise of faith, with patience and perseverance. And ye reverend men, whose precious dust is beneath our unworthy feet, pilgrims and sojourners in this vale of tears no longer, but Kings and Princes now at the right hand of the throne of the God you served so faithfully when on the earth—gather yourselves, immortal and awful shades, around us, and witness, not the useless honors we pay to your memories, but our resolves of fidelity to truth, duty, and freedom, which arise out of the contemplation of the beneficent operation of your own great principle of conduct, and the ever-widening influence of your holy teachings and Godlike example.



12-1-1911

